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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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With Contributions by:

Pierre Ton-That

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A-ONE #0938   09/21/07

    ~ Foreclosure Web Site! ~ People Are Talking!   ~ Internet Tax Ban?
    ~ New Interactive Ads!   ~ Fraud Infests E-Cards! ~ Belgium On eBay!
    ~ Classifying Malware!   ~ Cookie Notification?   ~ New USB 3.0 Spec!

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    ~ Clever New Hacks Alarm ~ Web Binge, User Dies!  ~ Litchi Minor Update

                  -* Digital Smiley Face Turns 25 *-
                -* EU Court Dismisses Microsoft Appeal *-
             -* Britain To Combat Cyber-Bullying In Schools *-




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->From the Editor's Keyboard             "Saying it like it is!"
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What a week! Working on a golf course in New England, in mid-September,
can be really cold some mornings! For the first half of the week, we had
to delay going out on the course due to frost! However, as the days
progressed, layers of clothing were coming off from hour to hour! And
the best part was that the latter part of the week was great - just in
time for me to enjoy a couple rounds of golf!

Not many rounds of golf left for this season, though. Amazing, but a few
days after I get a year older, another summer ends. Well, that can't be
helped - it's a calendar thing. But fall is here, and that's another
great season. A little cooler temps, leaves starting to change,
Halloween, pumpkins, Thanksgiving, and everything else. Autumn in New
England is something special!

So, while I start thinking about fall apples, maple sugar candy, and all of
the rest of the goodies that autumn has to offer, I'll let you dig into this
week's issue.

Until next time...


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                           Litchi 1.0C
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Bonsoir :)

Small update (released to help someone with his backups). If you have no
problem with your current version, then leave it and please wait for the
1.1

Download at my homepage or in directly in the folder
http://rajah.atari.org/files/ -> litchi10c_uk.zip (100KB)

News:
+ folders download (but not yet their contents)
+ upload and download of files to big to fit in memory (careful, do not kill
  this program, due to disk access while transferring)
+ local port indicated in the console (maybe help some ftp opening)

Tried with a big ZIP file and huge PNG image, seems to work okay, but
please verify your big up/downloaded files.

Now will study the download of folder contents...

Voilà

-- Pierre TON-THAT - Rajah Lone / Renaissance
http://ptonthat.club.fr

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                         PEOPLE ARE TALKING
                        compiled by Joe Mirando
                          joe@atarinews.org

[Editor's note: Due to the sparse number of messages in the Atari
newsgroups this week, there will be no People Are Talking column this
week.]

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Downstream Panic! Announced!
  """"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""   Metroid Prime 3 For Wii!
                                     Sony Delays 'Home'!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News   - The Latest Gaming News!
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                    Atari Announces Downstream Panic!

Atari, Inc. announced that it will publish Downstream Panic! The game will
offer unpredictable, fast-paced, tactical puzzle-action that places
players in the position of a sea-creature preservationist out to save the
world from a fantastic cyclone that has blasted the world's fish into the
Earth's atmosphere. It is up to the player to protect fish from land,
predators and other obstacles through the use of a variety of innovative
tools as they guide fish on their descent back into the ocean. Developed
by Eko Software, Downstream Panic! for the PSP (PlayStation Portable)

system is expected to ship early 2008.

"Fans of fast-paced puzzle games will fall in love with this new twist on the fish-out-of-water idea," said Donny Clay, producer, Atari, Inc. "We are thrilled to deliver this fun and interesting spin on the puzzle genre and look forward to publishing this title for the PSP system."

In Downstream Panic! players will save their scaly sea-friends in more than 80 different levels with five different customizable environments. Three different game modes (adventure, free play and survival) bring more of a challenge to the aquatic mix. With more than 10 hours of standard gameplay and downloadable content, Downstream Panic! aims to offer more than just the average PSP system puzzle fare.

'Metroid Prime 3: Corruption' Hits Bull's Eye On Wii

The next step in the evolution of Samus Aran is whopper.

Nintendo bounty hunter and icon sets her sights on the Wii in Metroid Prime 3 Corruption, a gratifying sequel and the franchise's most immersive to date.

Metroid's foray into motion control is just the start. Samus' latest adventure takes a traditional gaming genre and makes it palatable to players of any skill level.

Samus' tale in Corruption starts with a probe into a virus that's infected the Galactic Federation's computer network. During a debriefing, the Federation's base is attacked by rival Dark Samus and a crew of pirates.

Near the end of battle, Samus and other bounty hunters become infected with a virus-like element called Phazon. The Federation creates suits to harness the Phazon's power, but the slow process of corruption has already begun.

The Wii controls are a perfect fit for Metroid Prime 3. Samus' signature cannon is mimicked through the remote. The remote also doubles as your camera, moving your viewpoint as you wave the remote in any direction. You simply point and press the A button to fire, or hold down A and release for a stronger blast. If you're desperate for an attack boost, you can enter Hypermode and unleash a Phazon-powered cannon attack.

But the motion controls go beyond simply shooting. Twisting and pulling on latches opens doors. Pointing to numbered keypads accesses high-security environments. Corruption's best secondary action is the grapple feature. When you see a grapple icon, lock on and flick the nunchuk forward to snag your target. A quick jerk back rips hunks of metals off walls, shields from enemies, or other debris crossing your path.

The nunchuk also houses the incredibly effective Lock-On system. Pressing Z fixes Samus to a specific target, allowing you to strafe opponents easily. What's more impressive is the ability to freely aim wherever you choose. You can lock on to one opponent while shooting another that may be approaching quickly. It can get tricky at times, especially during the more heated boss battles, but it's fairly easy to adjust. Switching to the scan and ship visors is equally intuitive.

Most missions are puzzle based, requiring you to flip between morph ball and regular mode to move through levels to your goal. Combat is solid, although most mid-level battles lack intensity.

Fortunately, boss battles are highly gratifying. During one particularly intense conflict on the planet Elysia, you have to defeat your enemy while plummeting down a bottomless shaft. None of the bosses are real pushovers, and the fights are more intense as you advance.

Metroid's metamorphosis from an '80s-era side-scroller to a first-person epic has been fun to watch. Corruption's engrossing adventure utilizing the Wii's unique controls takes the franchise to the next level.

Sony Delays 'Home' Virtual World For PS3

In yet another embarrassing delay for Sony, the company is putting off the start of its "Home" virtual world services for the PlayStation 3, initially planned for later this year, until next spring.

The announcement Thursday came from Kazuo Hirai in his first major public appearance as the new chief executive of Sony Corp.'s video game business, Sony Computer Entertainment.

"We wanted to wait until we could offer what would be totally satisfying for consumers," Hirai said in a keynote speech at the Tokyo Game Show, an annual event where game machines and new software are shown.

"Home" is a real-time interactive online world much like Linden Lab's "Second Life" and other so-called "metaverse," except it's designed for PlayStation 3, Sony's newest home console.

Millions of people now enter "Second Life" on personal computers, moving avatars, or computer graphics images of themselves, in a virtual universe.

Major companies are also setting up shop in "Second Life," and analysts see great potential for such virtual worlds as a communication tool and real-life business.

Sony officials have shown the demonstration video of "Home" with much fanfare on various occasions, promising new kinds of businesses, such as advertising and electronic shopping, as well as games.

The product's delay is the latest trouble Sony has had with the PlayStation3, whose European launch had to be postponed for several months due to production problems.

Hirai, named in November as president, replacing Ken Kutaragi, the "father of the PlayStation," sounded apologetic in several places during his speech, acknowledging that the PlayStation 3 had failed to live up to the company's sales targets.

He promised to listen more to complaints and suggestions from game software creators and game fans to improve the PlayStation 3 business.

"The results we have produced so far have been unfortunate," he said at Makuhari Messe hall of the more than 5 million global sales for the

PlayStation 3, which went on sale late last year in Japan and the U.S. and in March in Europe.

Sony once dominated the gaming industry with PlayStation 2, predecessor for the PS3, but now faces intense competition from Microsoft Corp., which has sold 11.6 million Xbox 360 machines in the last two years, and from Nintendo Co.'s popular Wii, which has sold 9.3 million units since late last year.

Hirai showed a new remote controller for the PlayStation 3, "Dualshock 3," that will vibrate along with games such as the shock of impact of a sword hitting an object or a race car swerving. Old games will require download upgrades.

The controller goes on sale in November in Japan and next spring in the U.S. and Europe, he said.

Hirai said the core strategy would be to position the PlayStation 3 as a game machine as well as a way to view next-generation Blu-ray disc video.

"We must get back to the basics," he said.

Hirai, who formerly headed Sony Corp.'s North American gaming business, has fueled some expectations about a new strategy at the electronics maker.

The departure of Kutaragi, an icon among gamers, marked the end of an era at Sony when it dominated the video game industry with its flagship PlayStation.

Hirai became president in December, but became also chief executive in June. Kutaragi remains honorary chairman at Sony's gaming unit.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

EU Court Dismisses Microsoft Appeal

The European Union's second-highest court affirmed the EU's nine-year pursuit of Microsoft Corp., rejecting the software maker's appeal and strengthening the bloc's hand as it pushes ahead with cases against other major technology companies.

The European Court of First Instance ruled Monday the European Commission was correct in concluding that Microsoft used its dominance in desktop computers to muscle into server software and media players in the 1990s - and that Microsoft still poses similar threats.

It also upheld the record 497 million euro ($613 million) fine imposed on the company in 2004 - the largest ever levied by EU regulators.

The resounding victory for the EU - successful on all but one point - cements Europe's role as the lead international regulator of market-dominant companies around the world. The EU persisted with its case against Microsoft even as the U.S. Justice Department settled in 2001 and many of the original plaintiffs dropped out.

"In global markets, the antitrust policy that matters is the most restrictive one," said M.J. Moltenbray, a partner at Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer LLP.

In the last two months, EU regulators have charged Intel Corp. and Rambus Inc. with antitrust abuse. This week, it will hold closed hearings in which Apple Inc. will defend itself against allegations that it restricts customer choice with separate national iTunes stores. And Google Inc. will soon have to seek EU approval to take over DoubleClick Inc., a deal some rivals claim will give Google too much power over personal data and online ads.

"The decision very clearly gives the Commission quite broad power and discretion," Microsoft lawyer Brad Smith said. "There are many companies in our industry that have a very large market share." He added that the 248-page ruling would actually affect "every other industry in the world."

In Washington, Assistant Attorney General Thomas O. Barnett said the European ruling "may have the unfortunate consequence of harming consumers by chilling innovation and discouraging competition."

"In the United States, the antitrust laws are enforced to protect consumers by protecting competition, not competitors," he said in a statement. "In the absence of demonstrable consumer harm, all companies, including dominant firms, are encouraged to compete vigorously."

EU Competition Commissioner Neelie Kroes was dismissive of "scare stories" that the court decision would herald disaster for technology companies wanting to protect their innovations.

"There is one company that will have to change its illegal behavior as a result of this ruling: Microsoft," she said.

She added that Monday's victory was "bittersweet" because customers have no more choice than they did three years ago when Microsoft was originally fined.

"The court has confirmed the Commission's view that consumers are suffering at the hands of Microsoft," she said.

Kroes refused to say what implications Monday's decision would have on other legal fights between the EU and Microsoft, particularly one related to its recently released Windows Vista operating system.

Microsoft's rivals have raised issues with Vista's bundled security software, its integrated Internet and desktop search, and digital rights management tools used to protect copyrights.

The Court of First Instance's overwhelming endorsement of the Commission's monopoly-abuse case against Microsoft is a massive boost for the officials in Brussels who took on one of the world's most powerful companies.

"They will certainly gain significant confidence and continue to be very aggressive," said Ted Henneberry, a former Irish regulator and lawyer with Heller Ehrman LLP. "You'll see more, not less, complaints by other competitors about their rivals in the hopes of sparking some interest. That's another danger the Commission's going to face and I think they're aware of it that they're going to be used as a forum for disgruntled competitors."

The 13 judges on the Luxembourg-based Court considered Microsoft's appeal for 15 months.

The case started in the 1990s with complaints from Microsoft's U.S.-based rivals - including Sun Microsystems Inc. and RealNetworks Inc. - about how the software giant used its presence on most desktop computers to elbow into new markets and block competitors. Microsoft Windows operating system runs as much as 95 percent of the world's PCs.

On March 24, 2004, the European Commission found Microsoft guilty, ordering it to share the code that would help rivals' servers work better with Windows and make a version of its operating system available without its media player software. It also levied the record-setting fine, which Microsoft paid.

The company has been accused of dragging its feet. Last year, it was fined an additional 280.5 million euros ($357 million) for failing to supply the "complete and accurate" interoperability information. A version of Windows without a media player appeared a year and a half after the initial ruling, but no computer makers bothered to ship it with new PCs.

Microsoft now has two months to decide whether it will appeal to the EU's highest court. The company said it needed to consider the ruling before it decided how to proceed.

Microsoft did get a small victory, as the court overturned the regulators' decision to create a trustee to oversee Microsoft's compliance and force Microsoft to pay his costs.

But Microsoft's Smith said the company accepted that it may need to do more to comply with EU demands.

"It's not our desire and it is not our goal to have continuous arguments and disputes. We want to move forward," he told reporters, without giving specifics.

Senators Push for Internet Tax Ban

Three Republican U.S. senators on Thursday called on Congress to pass a permanent Internet tax ban before a moratorium expires Nov. 1.

The current Internet tax moratorium, which Congress has extended twice since 1998, bans taxes on Internet access, as well as other taxes unique to the Internet. It's important for Congress to pass a permanent ban soon, before state and local governments begin to tax Internet access, said Senator John McCain, an Arizona Republican.

Those who wonder what impact Internet taxes could have should look to U.S. telephone and mobile phone bills, where taxes are up to 20 percent of the cost, McCain said. "We cannot allow that to happen to the Internet - likely the most popular invention since the light bulb," McCain said at a press conference.

Several senators, many of them former state governors, have opposed a permanent extension of the tax ban. Earlier this year, Senators Lamar Alexander, a Tennessee Republican, and Tom Carper, a Delaware Democrat, introduced a bill that would narrow the moratorium's definition of Internet access and extend the ban for four years. That bill would close what supporters have called a loophole allowing telecom providers to argue that voice and other services bundled with Internet service shouldn't be taxed.

In addition, nine states that were allowed to maintain their Internet taxes would lose a total of up to US$120 million a year under a House of Representatives version of the moratorium extension, The National Governors Association has argued. The House version of the moratorium bill strips these states' exemptions.

If Congress makes the ban permanent, nothing would stop Internet providers from trying to expand the number of untaxed services, David Quam, director of federal relations for The National Governors Association, said in June. "The temporary provision keeps everyone honest," Quam said then.

But Senator John Sununu, a New Hampshire Republican, argued Thursday that a permanent ban is needed. If there's a problem with bundled services, that can be worked out in the bill, he said.

The Internet is "critically important to interstate and global commerce," Sununu said. "It makes no sense to have a national and global communications and business network to be subject to taxes by every state, city and county in the country."

The news conference came a day after the American Homeowners Grassroots Alliance, an advocacy group, sent letters to Congress calling on lawmakers to extend the tax ban. New Internet taxes would hurt telecommuters and home-based businesses, the group said.

Supporters of a permanent ban say it will help more U.S. residents connect to the Internet, a policy goal of many lawmakers. Asked if they would support another temporary tax ban, the three Republicans rejected that option.

"If it's the right thing to do, we ought to make it permanent," said Senator Trent Lott, a Mississippi Republican.

New USB 3.0 Spec Promises Instant Gratification

Intel, Hewlett-Packard, Microsoft, NEC, NXP Semiconductors, and Texas Instruments have formed the USB 3.0 Promoter Group to formulate a new USB spec for next-gen PCs, peripherals, and digital media devices. The new super-speed standard promises to deliver near-instant gratification whenever users need to quickly transfer large, bandwidth-hungry files.

"The digital era requires high-speed performance and reliable connectivity

to move the enormous amounts of digital content now present in everyday life," said Jeff Ravencraft, the president of the USB Implementers Forum – the trade association ultimately responsible for the new specification's development.

As the "next logical step for the PC's most popular wired connectivity," USB 3.0 will be able to move mountains of digital data at superspeeds "while maintaining the ease-of-use experience that users have come to love and expect from any USB technology," Ravencraft said.

One of the greatest successes to ever be unveiled at the annual Intel Developer Forum (IDF) was probably when the chipmaker launched the first-generation USB technology, said Intel executive Patrick Gelsinger during his recent IDF keynote address in San Francisco.

"We've delivered over six billion devices since 2001," with over two billion devices shipping "in the last year and three quarters, alone." the general manager of Intel's Digital Enterprise Group observed.

"When we launched USB, we were thinking about keyboards and mice, and disk drives and DVD players, and those kinds of things, but after we did it, the industry went wild, and look at all the other things that appeared," Gelsinger explained.

"As the market evolves to support customer demands for storing and moving larger amounts of digital content, we look forward to developing the third generation of USB technology that leverages the current USB interface and optimize it to meet these demands," Gelsinger added.

USB 3.0 will achieve a 10x boost in bandwidth throughput in comparison with present-day USB 2.0, Gelsinger boasted. In other words, if it takes ten minutes today to load up an iPod with a wide selection of multimedia tracks, it would only take 60 seconds to perform the same task over a USB 3.0 connection.

According to Gelsinger, a backward-compatible USB 3.0 cable is already in the works that will feature both optical and copper connections. A completed USB 3.0 specification is expected to be ready to roll in the first half of 2008.

"With the proliferation of Hi-Speed USB in a wide number of market segments, including personal computing, consumer electronics, and mobility, we anticipate that USB 3.0 will rapidly become the de facto standard as the replacement of USB 2.0 ports in applications where higher bandwidth is valued," predicted Texas Instruments vice president Greg Hantak.

However, given the normal lag time that occurs between the finalization of a new technical standard and the introduction of new printers, digital cameras and other peripheral devices based on the new technology, it is unlikely that USB 3.0 will become widely available in the marketplace before the end of 2009.

As the actor Carrie Fischer complained in Postcards from the Edge, "The problem with instant gratification is that it takes too long."

Google Tests Interactive Ads

Google Inc. is testing a new advertising format that it hopes will make people spend more time looking at ads online, and even embed them in their own Web sites.

Called Gadget ads, the service has already been in testing with a small handful of clients. On Wednesday Google announced that it was widening the tests considerably, which means more of the ads will start appearing on Web sites.

The format allows companies to build ads that include audio, video, games and live data feeds, and to spruce them up with the Flash and JavaScript programming languages. The ads wind up looking like small Web pages within a Web page, and people can save them to a blog or their iGoogle home page.

Google posted several examples of the Gadget ads on its Web site. An ad for a Nissan car lets people type a U.S. postal code in the advertisement to get a map showing traffic conditions where they live. Another for the Six Flags Inc. theme park includes a simple game and a link to "add to your Google home page."

The ads give advertisers detailed metrics about who uses them, according to Google. The Six Flags ad delivered 94.5 million impressions to 17.1 million unique users, and was interacted with about 200,000 times, Google said.

0.3 percent of those exposed to the gadget ads interacted with them, Google said. In comparison, direct mail generates a response rate of 2.18 percent, according to figures for 2006 from the Direct Marketing Association.

The gadget ads run on Google's Adsense advertising network and are priced by number of clicks or number of impressions. Google didn't say when the testing period would end, but the it said Gadget ads will eventually be available in 20 languages and 100 countries.

Microsoft Corp. and other companies also let advertisers put video and interactive features in Web sites, but Google claims that its ads offer more ways to keep people engaged. The ads can also appear on YouTube and sellers can include part of a checkout process in the advertisement.

Symantec Warns of Clever New Hacks

According to Symantec's latest Internet Security Threat Report, online criminals are getting more sophisticated - even commercial - in the development, distribution, and use of malicious code.

Symantec said that while financial gain continues to drive Internet crime, criminals are now using even more professional attack methods, tools, and strategies to conduct malicious activity online.

"The Internet threats and malicious activity we are currently tracking demonstrate that hackers are taking this trend to the next level by making cybercrime their actual profession, and they are employing businesslike practices to successfully accomplish this goal," said Arthur Wong, senior vice president of Symantec Security Response and Managed

Services, in a statement.

During the reporting period of Jan. 1, 2007 to June 30, 2007, Symantec detected an increase in Internet criminals leveraging sophisticated toolkits to carry out malicious attacks. The company pointed to MPack as one example of this strategy.

MPack is a professionally developed toolkit available for sale in the underground economy. Attackers can purchase and deploy MPack's collection of software components to plant malicious code on computers around the world, then monitor the effectiveness of their nefarious activities through various metrics. Phishing toolkits, which are a series of scripts that allow an attacker to set up phishing Web sites that spoof legitimate Web sites, are also available for sale.

In addition, Symantec reported a rise in multistage attacks in which the initial hack opens the door for attackers to deploy subsequent attacks. One example of a multistage attack is a downloader that allows an attacker to change the downloadable component to any type of threat that suits the attacker's objectives. According to Symantec, 28 of the top 50 malicious code samples were multistage downloaders.

"While mass spam e-mail phishing is likely to be detected quickly through automated and manual controls, targeted attacks are much more likely to bypass e-mail filters and be successful in their attempt to social engineer victims into opening attachments or clicking on links," said Michael Sutton, a security evangelist at SPI Dynamics.

Symantec observed that 61 percent of all vulnerabilities discovered were in Web applications. While Internet criminals have many targets, such as financial and recruitment sites, social networks are becoming more popular venues for attack.

Social-networking sites, Symantec noted, are particularly valuable to attackers because they provide access to a large number of people, many of whom trust the sites and their security. These Web sites can expose a lot of confidential user information that can then be used in attempts to conduct identity theft or online fraud, or to provide access to other Web sites from which attackers can deploy further attacks.

"We as a population are slowly increasing our public footprint through social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook," said Sutton. "We must be aware that in doing so we are also providing important information to attackers who are leveraging that information to conduct targeted attacks."

Not All Malware Is Equally Evil, Researchers Say

Two senior security veterans from Trend Micro Inc. are trying to get the industry to change how it classifies malicious software.

They argue that today's classification system, which tends to focus on the technical way the software works, neglects a far more important metric that matters more to users: how it tries to steal your money.

"This is my pet bugaboo - the unclear language," said David Perry, global director for education at Trend. "I come from 26 years of technical

support, and it irks me that we protect people against things and they don't know what we're protecting them against."

Perry and Anthony Arrott will present their paper, "New approaches to categorizing economically-motivated digital threats," on Friday at a security conference in Vienna.

Take the term "virus." The proper definition of virus is a piece of software that replicates or makes copies of itself and attaches itself to other pieces of software.

But for nonsecurity professionals, it's "taken to mean the universal indication that there is something wrong with their computer, no matter what the cause," Perry said. Toss in relatively newer terms such as "Trojan horse," "dialer" and "adware" and the situation becomes a mix of confusing vocabulary.

Perry and Arrott stop short of proposing a new taxonomy. However, they do detail some parameters that should be considered when building a new framework to categorize Web threats.

Although malware categorization systems exist, a new one is necessary because of the focus on economic crime. The "business" models behind the malware are far easier to define than the infinite technical variations that the malware can take, they write.

Malware can then be classified into fewer, overlapping categories would help deflect "the endless efforts to determine the exact definitions of the boundaries between categories," Perry said.

The new groupings would ideally take into account how a threat is installed, its economic purpose, how it exploits a host computer as well as how it hides itself from detection, the paper said.

Another new metric that could be considered is the persistence of threats, since it may more accurately frame the scope of an ongoing fraud. The antivirus industry has tended to focus on "top 10" lists, which indicate the most frequent recent threats but not the most successful attacks over time, the paper said.

Trend Micro researched over time fraudulent antispyware programs that were most persistent on computers. This research indicated the diversity and depth of fraudulent programs such as Winfixer or the Zlob Trojan, which purport to fix security problems but install advertising software instead.

"Rogue antispyware is just on example of economically-motivated threats where chronic persistence is more significant than acute outbreaks," the authors wrote.

Perry is hoping for fruitful discussions on taxonomy, although he said the security industry is notoriously fractured and not exactly known for working well together. "There are no grown-ups in this industry," he said.

Ultimately, Perry believes the proposal is "a bid toward accuracy and to deconflict the issues that face us as an industry."

Symantec CEO Urges Cookie Notification

The head of a leading security software vendor denounced the use of data files commonly used by Google Inc. and other Web sites to track user activity, saying such sites should seek permission ahead of time.

John Thompson, chief executive of Symantec Corp. in Cupertino, Calif., said the files, known as cookies, "are just as much an invasion of privacy as someone peering in my bedroom window."

Most major Web sites - including Symantec's - use cookies in some fashion.

Although some cookies are essential for remembering passwords and customizing a user's Web experience, they also can be used to create a profile of a user's online activities. Thompson said people are sometimes unaware that a cookie had been created or what gets done with any information collected, such as to target advertising.

"I don't have an issue with people having cookies on their machine as long as I've been told one just got planted there," Thompson said. "I think there is an opt-in option here that should be available to everyone."

He questioned whether there is a "difference between a peeping Tom in the physical world and a cookie prying into my private affairs in the digital world."

Thompson was in Brussels to speak to EU regulators about such issues as Internet security and data privacy.

He would not say if he thought the European Commission should flex its muscles and require user permission for cookies, merely saying "if the EU felt that was a problem, they might want to insert themselves here."

Thompson said he would want to know what Google would do with personal information if it takes over online ad tracker DoubleClick Inc. - a deal that is already raising concerns about the control the deal would give Google over online advertising and data it collects about search terms.

Google has tried to soothe EU concerns, cutting the time it retains data from 24 months to 18 months. The company also agreed to shorten the life span of its cookie, though it's not clear whether the move would do much to enhance privacy because the expiration date could get automatically extended when users revisit the search engine.

Fraud Infests E-cards

The e-card industry began seeing some pretty unfriendly greetings this past June.

That's when scammers started flooding e-mail in-boxes with fake greeting cards, trying to trick victims into clicking on links that would send them to malicious Web sites.

The goal is always the same: trick the victim into visiting an untrustworthy Web site, and then try to hijack his computer and make it

part of a larger "botnet" network that can be pressed into service for a variety of nefarious purposes. Often the e-card messages are extremely simple - something like "Our Greeting System has a Labor Day card for you, go here to pick it up." - but scammers have sent hundreds of millions of them over the past few months.

By July, Symantec Corp. tracked more than 250 million fake cards, and soon the mainstream press had picked up on the story. On August 23, the Today Show ran a segment highlighting the problem, warning its viewers to be wary of the cards they open.

All of that bad publicity has had at least a short-term effect on the public's willingness to use e-cards, according to Steve Ruschill general manager of Hallmark Interactive. "Overall we've probably seen a 10 percent decline in e-card sends," he said. "Within about a period of two weeks, especially when the Today Show story hit... we just saw it kind of drop."

E-card use at Hallmark is starting to recover, and while the industry is now making some changes to respond to this problem, the fraud will probably not affect the e-card suppliers bottom line, said Barbara Miller, a spokeswoman with The Greeting Card Association. "I'm not sure that it's having that much impact other than the real need for the industry to make sure that consumers are aware of how to avoid e-mail fraud," she said.

Certainly there has been customer confusion. During a three-week period around July, Miller found herself responding to more than 750 angry people who had received spam that purported to originate from her organization's Greetingcard.org domain. The Greeting Card Association is an industry organization that does not even send out e-cards, she noted.

Now two of the largest e-card distributors in the U.S. have begun forcing e-card senders to include their first and last names in an effort to make it easier for recipients to tell when these cards are coming from someone they know.

Late last week, AG.com Inc.'s AmericanGreetings changed its e-cards to include the name and e-mail address of the sender in the body of the e-mail. "This basically just personalizes it so you know where the e-card is coming from, and so you know that it is a valid e-card," said Frank Cirillo, an AmericanGreetings spokesman.

Cirillo said that, unlike Hallmark, AmericanGreetings has not seen a drop in e-card usage over the past few months.

On Monday Hallmark followed suit and is now forcing users to enter their first and last names in order to make it clear to the recipient that the card is really coming from a known sender.

Originally, Hallmark had intended to take things a step further, and eliminate links in its e-cards altogether. In tests, Hallmark sent redesigned cards to recipients, telling them not to click on links, but to instead type in the Hallmark.com Web address and then enter a special code to retrieve their messages.

Ultimately, this didn't work out, however, after it confused some users, Ruschill said. That's because Web-based e-mail clients like Gmail and Yahoo Mail recognize Web addresses and automatically insert clickable links when they see things like Hallmark.com in a message. "We had a

totally manual process laid out," he said. "I appreciate what Google and
Yahoo have done but on the other side, it was like, 'man it's really
confusing.'"

The pain felt over the past few months by the greeting card industry
shows how quickly scammers can undermine confidence in what has become a
crucial communication tool for many industries.

Because this kind of malicious spam is usually sent from the compromised
botnet computers themselves it costs almost nothing to distribute. But it
can take a toll on the reputation, and ultimately the revenues of
companies that are targeted.

"Companies have become more and more reliant upon the Internet and their
Internet presence as a way to promote themselves and increase their
revenues," said Dave Greenwood, vice president of technical operations
with BD-Protect Inc., a company that works with corporations, ISPs and
law enforcement to take down servers that are being used in fraud. "They
see the Internet and their online presence as a very important part of
their revenue stream and they do not want to see that revenue stream put
at risk."

IRS Opens Foreclosure Web Site

The Internal Revenue Service said Monday it has added a new section to
its Web site to answer tax questions for those losing their homes due to
foreclosures.

The new section on IRS.gov includes a worksheet to help homeowners
determine whether they are eligible for any foreclosure-related tax
relief.

For those who find they owe additional tax, it includes a form for
requesting a payment agreement with the IRS.

The tax agency noted that if the debt wiped out through foreclosure
exceeds the value of the property, the difference is normally taxable
income. But a special rule also allows insolvent borrowers to offset that
income to the extent their liabilities exceed their assets.

President Bush has proposed tax relief as part of efforts to deal with
the sharp rise in mortgage defaults. He said he would support legislation
pending in Congress that would temporarily change tax law to let
homeowners avoid paying taxes on forgiven debt in loans that are being
restructured by financial institutions.

Britain To Combat 'Cyber-Bullying' In Schools

Britain on Friday launched a campaign to help schools combat
"cyber-bullying" of children and teachers using the Internet and mobile
phones.

The initiative - backed by teaching unions - came after research from the
Department for Children, Schools and Families found that 34 percent of

12- to 15-year-olds had experienced some form of high-tech harassment.

Teaching unions have also expressed concern that its members and other school staff are falling foul of bullies who send abusive text messages or emails and post offensive clips on the web.

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers union said nearly one in five of its members had complained of cyber-bullying in the last 12 months.

Schools Secretary Ed Balls said any form of bullying was unacceptable.

"Cyber-bullying is a particularly insidious type of bullying as it can follow young people wherever they go and the anonymity that it seemingly affords to the perpetrator can make it even more stressful for the victim.

"Cyber-bullying takes different forms - threats, intimidation, harassment or 'cyber-stalking', unauthorised publication of private information or images, impersonation and 'happy slapping'," he said.

The campaign includes tips to minimise risk such as not responding to malicious texts or emails, saving evidence and reporting it, keeping passwords secret and refusing to divulge mobile phone numbers or other personal details.

It has been developed in consultation with anti-bullying specialists, mobile phone companies and websites including Bebo, MySpace and YouTube.

Britain's largest teaching union the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) is currently campaigning for mobile phones to be classed as potentially offensive weapons and banned during school hours.

It also wants legislation to prevent teachers being named in allegations on websites and an end to school policies requiring teachers to disclose their personal mobile phone numbers or email addresses for use by pupils.

Digital 'Smiley Face' Turns 25

It was a serious contribution to the electronic lexicon. :-) Twenty-five years ago, Carnegie Mellon University professor Scott E. Fahlman says, he was the first to use three keystrokes - a colon followed by a hyphen and a parenthesis - as a horizontal "smiley face" in a computer message.

To mark the anniversary Wednesday, Fahlman and his colleagues are starting an annual student contest for innovation in technology-assisted, person-to-person communication. The Smiley Award, sponsored by Yahoo Inc., carries a $500 cash
prize.

Language experts say the smiley face and other emotional icons, known as emoticons, have given people a concise way in e-mail and other electronic messages of expressing sentiments that otherwise would be difficult to detect.

Fahlman posted the emoticon in a message to an online electronic bulletin board at 11:44 a.m. on Sept. 19, 1982, during a discussion about the limits of online humor and how to denote comments meant to be taken

lightly.

"I propose the following character sequence for joke markers: :-)," wrote Fahlman. "Read it sideways."

The suggestion gave computer users a way to convey humor or positive feelings with a smile - or the opposite sentiments by reversing the parenthesis to form a frown.

Carnegie Mellon said Fahlman's smileys spread from its campus to other universities, then businesses and eventually around the world as the Internet gained popularity.

Computer science and linguistics professors contacted by The Associated Press said they were unaware of who first used the symbol.

"I've never seen any hard evidence that the :-) sequence was in use before my original post, and I've never run into anyone who actually claims to have invented it before I did," Fahlman wrote on the university's Web page dedicated to the smiley face. "But it's always possible that someone else had the same idea - it's a simple and obvious idea, after all."

Variations, such as the "wink" that uses a semicolon, emerged later. And today people can hardly imagine using computer chat programs that don't translate keystrokes into colorful graphics, said Ryan Stansifer, a computer science professor at the Florida Institute of Technology.

"Now we have so much power, we don't settle for a colon-dash-paren," he said. "You want the smiley face, so all these chatting softwares have to have them."

Instant messaging programs often contain an array of faces intended to express emotions ranging from surprise to affection to embarrassment.

"It has been fascinating to watch this phenomenon grow from a little message I tossed off in 10 minutes to something that has spread all around the world," Fahlman was quoted as saying in a university statement. "I sometimes wonder how many millions of people have typed these characters, and how many have turned their heads to one side to view a smiley, in the 25 years since this all started."

Amy Weinberg, a University of Maryland linguist and computer scientist, said emoticons such as the smiley were "definitely creeping into the way, both in business and academia, people communicate."

"In terms of things that language processing does, you have to take them into account," she said. "If you're doing almost anything ... and you have a sentence that says 'I love my boss' and then there's a smiley face, you better not take that seriously."

Emoticons reflect the likely original purpose of language - to enable people to express emotion, said Clifford Nass, a professor of communications at Stanford University. The emotion behind a written sentence may be hard to discern because emotion is often conveyed through tone of voice, he said.

"What emoticons do is essentially provide a mechanism to transmit emotion when you don't have the voice," Nass said.

In some ways, he added, they also give people "the ability not to think as hard about the words they're using."

Stansifer said the emoticon was part of a natural progression in communication.

"I don't think the smiley face was the beginning and the end," he said. "All people at all times take advantage of whatever means of communication they have."

On the Net:

Carnegie Mellon University's smiley page: http://www.cs.cmu.edu/smiley/

EBay Stops Sale Of Belgium

Internet auction website eBay on Monday withdrew an unusual second-hand sale item, the country of Belgium, which had attracted an offer of 10 million euros (13.9 million dollars).

"Belgium, a kingdom in three parts" was posted on the Belgian ebay site as offering "plenty of choice" despite the caveat that it comes with "300 billion of National Debt."

Offered in three parts - Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia - the accompanying blurb said the kingdom "can be bought as a whole (not recommended)."

The vendor also included as added extras "the king and his court (costs not included)."

Ebay spokesman Peter Burin said the site could not host the sale of anything virtual or "unrealistic," the Belga news agency reported.

The 'vendor' was named as a former journalist, Gerrit Six. Offering his lot at an initial price of one euro, he saw 26 subsequent bids culminating in the 10 million euro offer on Monday before the auction was halted.

The spoof sale was offered while Belgium is mired in a political crisis which has led to discussion over the country's future as a federal state.

Tuesday marks 100 days since the country's general election with no sign of a coalition government being formed by the political parties in Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia.

According to the ebay spokesman, it wasn't the first time Belgium had been put up for sale.

"But the last time it wasn't a Belgian who made the announcement and it wasn't as well done or as amusing," said Burin.

China Web-User Dies After Three-Day Online Binge

A man in southern China collapsed and died after a three-day marathon

online session at a cybercafe, state media reported on Monday.

The web-user, estimated to be 30 years old, suddenly collapsed in front
of his computer terminal in Guangdong province, and emergency personnel
were unable to revive him, the Beijing News reported.

"According to preliminary findings, the length of time this man spent
online might have triggered heart problems," the paper quoted a local
hospital emergency medic in the city of Zhongshan as saying.

The paper did not provide the man's name or the online activities he
was
engaged in.

Worried about growing Internet addiction, China's government has taken
steps to combat the problem, including forcing online gaming sites to
dock the points of gamers who stay online too long.

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